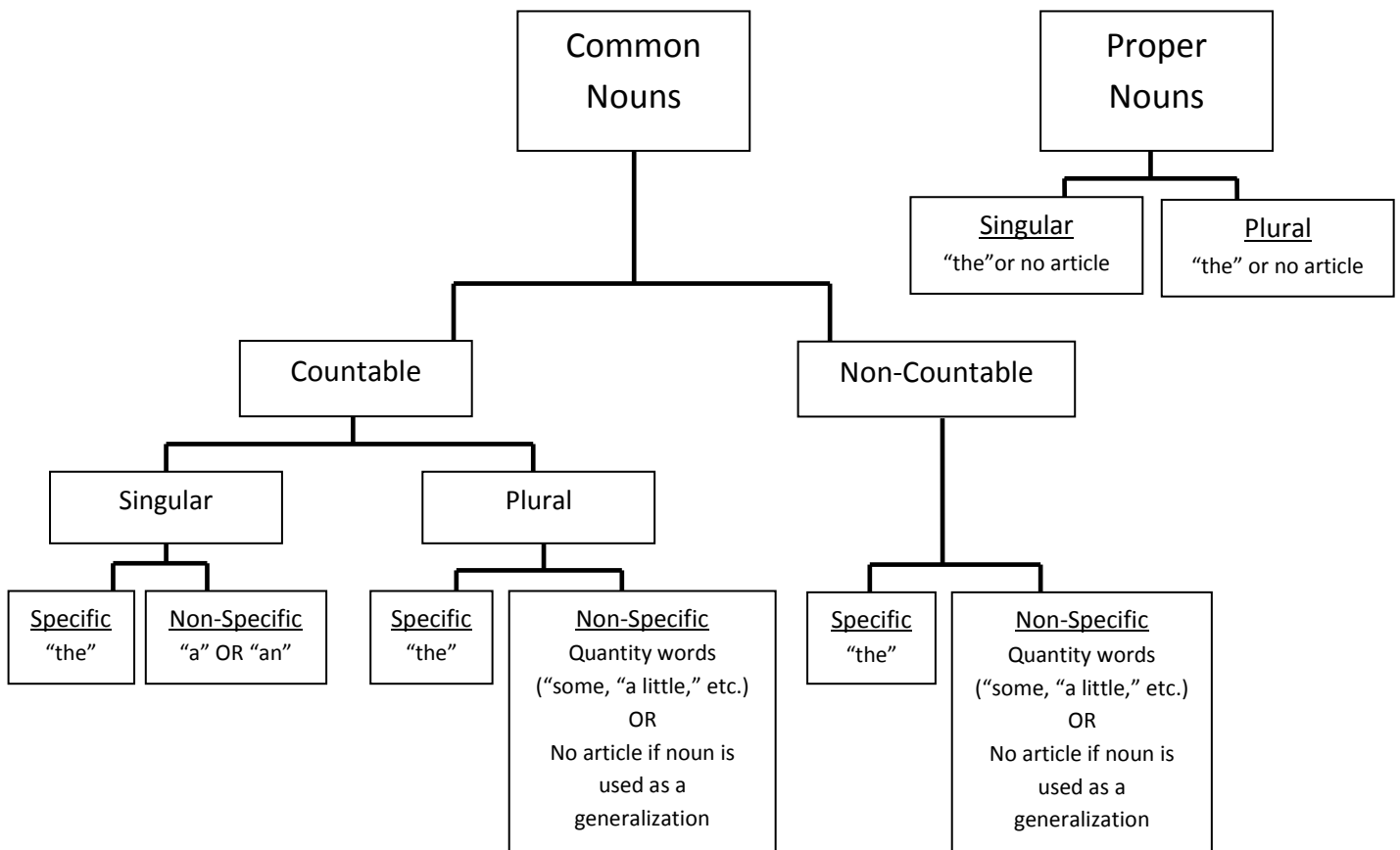


English Language Lesson: Nouns, Pronouns, and Articles

Once you know the basics of sentence construction, let's look at the types of words in detail. Remember that there are eight types of words: nouns, pronouns, verb, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, and interjections. In this lesson, we'll look at nouns and pronouns in detail. We'll also look at *articles*, a special kind of adjective that we use with nouns.

Nouns and Articles

A *noun* is a word that represents a person, place, object, or idea. Nouns can be concrete items such as a fan or a brick; named people or places such as President Roosevelt or Berlin, Germany; or abstract ideas such as love or hatred. In a sentence, nouns are subjects, direct objects, predicate nominatives, and objects of prepositions. An *article* is a determiner that may or may not precede a noun. Articles can be tricky – while some languages use them, others do not, and they operate differently in almost every language. The chart below provides a visual overview of the information in the handout. It may help you to reference it as we work through the lesson.¹



Common vs. Proper Nouns

Common nouns are nouns that discuss general things. As we mentioned already, a noun can be an object or an abstraction. It can also refer to a quality (darkness, pride, smoothness) an action (swimming, effort, operation) or a concept (art, minority, belief).

¹ Developed by E. Baldwin and R.J. Stripling. First printed for the QWC at University of Arkansas

Proper nouns are nouns that refer to a person, place or thing that is formal and specific. The first letter of a proper noun is always capitalized. The list below contains both proper and common nouns. The proper noun is one specific form of the common noun.

<u>Proper</u>	<u>Common</u>
Mt. Everest	a mountain
Asia	a continent
Maxwell Secondary School	a high school
Lake Tahoe	a lake / a body of water
Hugh Jackman	an actor
Mike Bebee	a politician
Nigerians	a people group
Roman Catholic	a religion

Plural or Singular?

Common nouns and proper nouns can be either plural (representing multiple things) or singular (representing one thing). Normally, a plural nouns ends in an “s”.

Example	ball (singular)	balls (plural)
	mountain range	mountain ranges
	An American	Several Americans

Notice two things: first, if a word has two parts – a descriptor and a noun, such as “mountain range” – only the main word (not the descriptor) receives the “s” [example: “Commander in chief” → “commanders in chief”; “soccer ball” → “soccer balls”] Second, proper nouns can be made plural as well - “Americans.”

There are a few general exceptions to this rule.

- Words ending in “y” – If there is a consonant before the “y”², the “y” becomes “ies”
Examples: baby → babies; lady → ladies
– If there is a vowel before the “y”, add an “s” as usual
Example: monkey → monkeys; valley → valleys
- Words ending in x, sh, ch or s – Add an “es”
Example: church → churches; fox → foxes
- Words ending in “f” or “fe” – Change the “f” or “fe” to a “v” and add “es”
Example: leaf → leaves; calf → calves

There are many, many exceptions to pluralization rules. Some words are both singular and plural, such as “sheep” and “deer.” Some words change internally (“foot” → “feet”; “mouse” → “mice”). Some words add letters other than “s” (“radius” → “radii”; “criterion” → “criteria”). Your best friend in learning these is a good English dictionary. The internet can be a valuable resource as well.

Articles

There are two types of articles: *definite (specific)* and *indefinite (non-specific)*. An *indefinite article* modifies a general noun or a noun that the reader is not already familiar with. *A heart beats 74 times a minute* doesn’t refer to one particular heart; it refers to the body part in general. *The heart that was going to be transplanted beat only 56 times a minute* refers to a specific heart – one that a patient is

² Reminder: Consonants are : b c d f g h j k l m n p q r s t v w x y z
Vowels are: a e i o u

waiting for! As we work through the types of articles, refer back to the chart on page 1. It will help you keep the articles in order.

In order to determine which article is needed, we need to determine which type of noun the article will accompany. Proper nouns are the easiest to identify.

A proper noun may be either plural or singular, but it is always specific.

Because a proper noun refers to a particular thing, it must always be specific.

A *singular proper* noun usually takes no article; however, in certain cases, it may take a “**the**.”

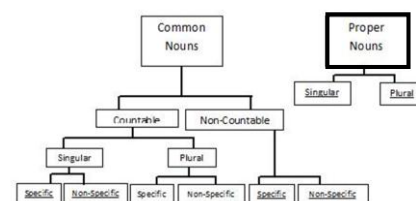
Example: McDonalds is my favorite restaurant.

McDonald's is the proper noun taking no article.

The Pacific Ocean is home to the Great Barrier Reef.

The Pacific Ocean and the Great Barrier Reef are both proper nouns.

Because a specific type of noun is included in the name (“Ocean” and “Reef”), the proper noun takes the specific article.



A *plural proper* noun usually takes a “**the**”; however, in certain cases it takes no article.

Example: The Great Lakes are home to fascinating birds and fish.

The Great Lakes is a plural set of specific mountains – a named noun – which takes the article.

Americans are often poor travelers overseas.

Referring to a non-specific group of Americans, the plural proper noun cannot take a specific article, so it takes none.

The Americans dined at a pizza shop.

Because this refers to a specific set of Americans, the specific article is needed.

A common noun may be either countable or non-countable.

A *countable* noun is an individual object that can, as the name suggests, be counted. If you can have one, two, three, etc. of the noun, it is countable.

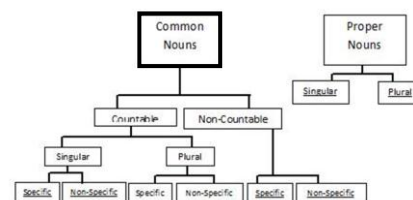
Example: “Table” is a countable noun: “one table” “two tables” etc.

“Patriot” is a countable noun: “one patriot” “two patriots””

A *non-countable (uncountable)* noun refers to items that are not individual and therefore cannot be counted. Because they cannot be counted, they do not have a plural form.

Example: “Air” is a non-countable noun. You cannot say “one air” “two air” etc.

“Patriotism” is a non-countable noun. You cannot say. “one patriotism” “two patriotism” etc.



A non-countable noun may be either specific or non-specific.

If the non-countable noun refers to something unique OR something that has been mentioned before, it is specific and takes the article “**the**.”

Example: Jennifer gave the facts to the board of directors.

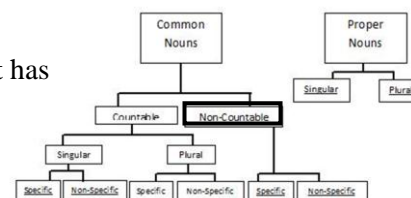
Because these facts are specific, we use “the.”

If the non-countable noun refers to something general, it is non-specific. You may either use no article or a quantity word. A *quantity word* indicates the amount of the noun you are discussing.

Example: Hard work brings about results.

“Hard work” is a general concept, so it takes no article.

A little hard work goes a long way.



Much hard work will get the job done.

“Hard work” is still general, but these descriptors indicate an amount.

A countable noun may be either singular or plural.

A *singular countable noun* may be either *specific* or *non-specific*.

A *specific singular countable noun* describes one of a unique thing OR one of a thing that has already been introduced to the reader. For these nouns, you must use the article “**the**.”

Example: Rachel put the dog outside.

There is one dog, and it is a specific dog (the one that went outside).

Al Gore encourages us to protect the earth.

There is only one planet earth, so it is specific.

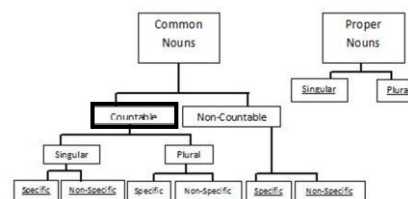
A *non-specific singular countable noun* describes one of a general thing OR one of something that has not yet been introduced to the reader. For these nouns, use the article “**a**” or “**an**.”³

Example: Amy needs to get a car now that winter is coming.

Amy has not yet selected a specific car, so the general article is used.

An apple a day keeps the doctor away.

Neither the apple nor the day is particular, so the general articles are used.



A *plural countable noun* be either *specific* or *non-specific*.

A *specific plural countable noun* describes more than one of a unique thing OR more than one of a thing that has not already been introduced to the reader. For these nouns, you must use the article “**the**.”

Example: The websites about Sarah Palin have received thousands of hits today.

These are multiple, but specific, websites (the ones about Sarah Palin), so they take the article “the.”

“Of course we’re crazy; we’re the children of the insane.” –The Beatles

Specific children (the ones of the insane) and specific insane (the ones that had the children) are mentioned, so they both take the article “the.”

A *non-specific plural countable noun* references more than one unique thing or more than one of a thing that has already been introduced to the reader. For these nouns, use no article or use a quantity word (just as you do with a non-countable noun).

Example: Pumpkins are native to the United States.

Because we are referring to all pumpkins, no article is needed.

Some children like to chase the ice cream truck.

The sentence suggests quantity of general children, so the quantity word “Some” is used.

People will sometimes let you down.

“People” is used as a generalization here, so no article is needed.

Pronouns

Pronouns are words that substitute for nouns in a sentence. The *pronoun* is substitute word, and the *antecedent* is the noun that it is substituting.

Example: Marcus left his cloak on the table.

³ If the noun starts with a consonant or consonant sound, use the article “a.” Example: a house, a university
If the noun starts with a vowel or a vowel sound, use the article “an.” Example: an oak, an elephant

The pronoun here is “his.” It is standing in for the antecedent “Marcus.” This allows us to avoid saying “Marcus left Marcus’s cloak on the table.”

Just as there are several functions for nouns, there are several types of pronouns:

Personal Pronouns

Personal pronouns are pronouns that stand in for the three persons in English speech – first second and third person. Remember from lesson 1: there are different ways nouns can act in a sentence (subject, direct object, indirect object, predicate nominative). Similarly, there are three types of personal pronouns for each person – nominative (in which the person is the subject of the sentence), possessive (in which the person owns something), and objective (in which the person is the object of the sentence). The chart below breaks down personal pronouns by their number, type, and case:

	First person	Second Person	Third Person
Singular			
-Nominative	I	You	He, she, it
-Possessive	My, mine	Your, yours	His, her, hers, its
-Objective	Me	You	Him, her, it
Plural			
-Nominative	We	You	They
-Possessive	Our, ours	Your, yours	Their, Theirs
-Objective	Us	You	Them

Examples:

Nominative case: Pronoun acts as a subject or predicate normative

I want cake. *You* want cake. *He* wants cake.

It must have been *she*. Was it *you* who told the baker? The culprit is *he*.

Objective case: Pronoun acts as a direct or indirect object.

Give the cake to *me*. I asked *you* for it. Have you seen *them* with it?

Possessives: Pronoun indicates ownership.

Our cake tastes the best. *Your* cake is dry and crumbly. The worst cake, however is *theirs*.

Note: Personal pronouns may also be reflexive or intensive. These are called compound personal pronouns and are formed by adding “-self” or “-selves” to the end of a personal pronoun.

Reflexive personal pronouns shows the action of the verb coming back on the subject.

Example: I enjoyed *myself*. She treated *herself* to a bubble bath.

Intensifying personal pronouns add emphasis to the antecedent. They follow immediately after the noun and can be removed without changing the overall meaning of the sentence.

Example: The president *himself* came to the ball.

The baker *herself* didn’t think she could have made a better cake.

Never use an intensifying pronoun on its own.

INCORRECT: *Myself* went to the bakery to pick up the cake.

CORRECT: I went to the bakery to pick up the cake.

INCORRECT: Jenna and *myself* thought it tasted like heaven.

CORRECT: Jenna and I thought it tasted like heaven.

Relative Pronouns

Relative pronouns join clauses to make a complex sentence. Relative pronouns are used at the beginning of the subordinate clause which gives some specific information about the main clause. Within their clauses they may be used as subjects, objects, and possessives.

The relative pronouns are: that, who, whom, whose, which, where, when, and why.

Function ↓	Reference to →	People	Things	Place	Time	Reason
Subject		Who/that	Which/that			
Object		That/Who/ Whom	Which/that	Where	When	Why
Possessive		Whose	Whose/ of which ⁴			

Note the use of relative pronouns below. The larger clauses are in parenthesis.

Relative pronoun used as a subject:

These are the dogs (*that* I wanted to adopt).

After a year, Jeannie finally got used to her neighbors (*who* played music all night).

Relative pronoun used as an object (pronouns in brackets are optional and could be eliminated)

The town ([*which/that*] I wanted to live in) is now a ghost town.

I was surprised by the party([*which/that*]) my friends threw.

Shelly did want to work with the man (*who*) wasted her time.

Relative pronoun used as a possessive:

Whose is the only possessive relative pronoun is in English.

The dog (*whose* bone went missing) is whining at the back door.

The lawyer (*whose* client went missing) lost the case.

The water bottle (*whose* cap was leaking) was thrown away.

Interrogative Pronouns

Interrogative pronouns begin questions and have no antecedent.

The interrogative pronouns are: who, whom, which, and what.

Example: *Who* took my book?

Which way is the grocery store?

What is the quickest way to get to the airport?

Demonstrative Pronouns

Demonstrative pronouns point out or make reference to something. When spoken, they do not require antecedents. In writing, they may or may not take antecedents.

The demonstrative pronouns are: this, that, these, those.

Example: Is *this* the dress that is on sale?

That is clearly the best way to proceed.

These paintings are clearly superior to those.

Note: There is some overlap in words between demonstrative pronouns and demonstrative adjectives. The pronouns will fill a noun role, while the adjectives will modify:

Pronoun: *This* is the week Jessica specified for the trip.

Adjective: Jessica specified *this* week for the trip.

⁴ Adapted from the OWL @ Purdue. 2009.

Indefinite Pronouns

An indefinite pronoun is a pronoun that refers to one or more unspecified beings, objects, or places. They are often concerned with number, portion, or amount.

There are many indefinite pronouns. We can classify them by group:

Single indefinite pronouns: another, anybody, anyone, anything, each, either, enough, everybody, everyone, everything, less, little, much, neither, no one, nobody, nothing, one, other, somebody, someone, something

Example: *No one* wanted to come to the show with me.

One of the clowns was terrifying.

Someone call for help!

Plural indefinite pronouns: both, few, fewer, many, others, several

Example: *Several* players stormed off of the field.

Others stayed behind to wait for the referee's call.

Plural OR singular indefinite pronouns (also called amount pronouns): all, any, more, most, none, plenty, some, such.

Example: *All* of the gold was wasted. (singular)

All of the children were brats.

Common Pronoun Errors

There are several errors that frequently appear with pronoun usage:

1. Sexist Pronouns: Do not use masculine pronouns to refer to groups that can include both genders.

“Each doctor got out his syringe.”

Should be → The doctors got out their syringes.

“This is a great step for mankind.”

Should be → This is a great step for all people (OR for all humankind).

2. Vague use of pronouns: *Pronouns must have clear antecedents in noun form.*

“I kicked the table with the book before it fell on the ground.” [It is unclear in this sentence which of the objects fell on the floor. Is it the book or the table?]

Should be → I kicked the table, causing the book to fall on the ground.

“Emily wanted to play with my dog before she walked with me.” [It is unclear in this sentence who is doing the walking – Emily or the dog?]

Should be → Before Emily and I went on our walk, she wanted to play with the dog.

“I went to the rally. That wasn't a good idea.” [It unclear what the antecedent for “that” is.]

Should be → My decision to attend the rally was a bad idea.

3. Inappropriate use of “who,” “which” and “that”: *Only people are “who” and “which.” Animals and objects are “that.”*

“This is the pony who loves carrots.”

Should be → This is the pony that loves carrots.

“The astronauts that returned from space were tired.”

Should be → The astronauts who returned from space were tired.

Sources: The St. Martin's Handbook (Bedford-St. Martin's); The OWL @ Purdue